LIBERTY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Elmer Book Critique

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GLST650
Intercultural Communication and Engagement

by

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Introduction

Cross-Cultural Servanthood is a book that makes the attempt to show how to make disciples by following the example of Jesus. We are commanded in Matthew 28:19-20 to go and make disciples of all nations, in doing so cultural barriers will have to be overcome. In Acts Paul demonstrated this concept when he stated in 1 Corinthians 9: 20-22, where Paul states that to the Jew he became a Jew and to the weak he became weak all with the purpose that in doing so he could win some into the kingdom. The idea that Paul had here is a concept that can be used today to make disciples for the kingdom. He had the heart of the servant and that is what one must do in order to break down the walls of another culture.

The Author

Duane H. Elmer (Ph.D., Michigan State U.) is director of the Ph.D. program in educational studies and is the G. W. Aldeen Chair of International Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. Recently, he led faculty development workshops at over 25 European and Middle Eastern schools on the theme of Teaching for Transformation. He has taught at Durban Bible College (Durban, South Africa), Michigan State University and Wheaton College and Graduate School.[1]

[1] "Duane Elmer," Amazon, http://www.amazon.com/Duane-Elmer/e/B001JSBLX2 (accessed September 8, 2012).

Summary

The main theme that Elmer addresses in this book can be found in the statement “Everyone is ethnocentric”[2]. The idea is that one views their own culture as being natural and therefore the one that is correct. Elmer spends the entire book trying to demolish this concept.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section covers the idea of what are the basic tenants of servanthood. Dr. Elmer does this by explaining what it means to be a servant (chapter 1), how to take on the servant mind of Christ (chapter 2), and lastly how humility is the earmark of being a servant (chapter 3).

The second section is the largest section and it deals with how to practically put on this idea of servanthood. Dr. Elmer does this by showing a process of engaging someone cross culturally. It is not possible in this short review to list all of these fine points but a few will get the point across. Chapter 4 deals with the idea of openness. This is the idea of allowing others to feel comfortable being around a person from a different culture. Chapter 7 deals with the idea of learning. It is the concept of learning about another culture not so that one can fix what they perceive to be wrong but so that it changes their perspective on that culture. The main point of this chapter is that the nationals of whatever country have valuable insights that can help the missionary learn how the people function in their culture. Chapter 9 shows how one must look through another’s eyes to see how a

[2] Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2006), 144 (Kindle Edition).

culture functions and puts the pieces of the cultural puzzle together. It allows one to understand how the culture functions and processes information.

The last section comprises how to put this all together and addresses some of the challenges that one may encounter. Chapter 11 deals with how to combine the servant attitude with that of leadership. It attempts to address how one can become a servant leader. The final chapter of this book shows through the life of Joseph how to become a true cross cultural servant.

Critique

One of the greatest strengths of this book is the fact that Dr. Elmer actually gives working definitions of what is means to be acceptant and open. These concepts are refreshing to see and something that is not found in many other books on this topic. The book is one that can benefit both the short term mission trip participant as well as those that find themselves in a lifetime missionary position. The second section of this book helps those that are looking for practical ways to implement the making of disciples cross culturally easier.

Another strength of this book is that it ties the concepts such as ethnocentric and acceptance that are spoken about in many books on missions to Biblical scriptures to explain these concepts. Dr. Elmer reminds his readers that it is God that made all people and he is the one with the answers in how to deal with these people cross culturally. Dr. Elmer does a

great job of showing how these concepts can be found in the scriptures. In the chapter on openness he shows the example of Christ's willingness to eat and commune with sinners. Sinners found it easy to come to Jesus and feel comfortable in his presence. This is a remarkable achievement considering that Jesus was God and God's stance on sin. Even though Jesus made those feel welcome he never condoned their sins but instead made is easy for them to open up to him.

The last and what this reviewer sees as the greatest strength of this book is that it never tells someone that they must compromise their principles on sin in order to be accepted by those being witnessed to. Even though Dr. Elmer has a strong focus upon openness and acceptance it is not to the exclusion of Biblical truths. It is best summed up in this manner,

> While openness is a wonderful virtue, it is not to be misconstrued as religious relativism. Our challenge is to be inclusive in extending grace to all people yet exclusive in affirming that the Bible is the authoritative truth of God. While this often brings charges of exclusivism, narrowness, rigidity and elitism, the fact is that to make the Bible one of many truths is to destroy its' claims. We can remain open to cultural diversity as long as it doesn't violate a clear mandate of Scripture.[3]

Dr. Elmer is making the point that there is no substitute for Biblical truth and it must never be compromised.

Application

This book has proven to be a challenge to me from the standpoint of being ethnocentric. There are times that I must catch

[3] Ibid., 54 (Kindle Edition)

myself from placing others into categories and not seeing the person that is caught up in the sin. One of the stories that really gripped me was when Dr. Elmer encountered a prostitute on the streets of Chicago and asking if the lady was indeed a prostitute. His friend Mark replied no she is a lady caught up in the sin of prostitution.[4] This story reminded me that I too often see people and label them and then that is all that I can see.

I may never again go on a mission's trip outside of this country but on a bi-weekly basis I enter into the local county jail and encounter people from a different culture. This book has helped me to be more accepting and open with those that I encounter. In order for me to be effective I must be willing to set some of my stereotypes aside and see people for who they are not what sin they are entrapped in. I have personal experience in this environment that makes it easier for me to break down some of these cultural walls but I too find myself at times grouping people with labels.

Conclusion

This book is a much needed resource for those that are engaged in cross-cultural ministry either abroad or in their own back yard. Anyone that seeks to be missional in their life will find this book to be a great tool to break down barriers. One word of caution though needs to be taken and that is reading this book could forever change

[4] Ibid., 61 (Kindle Edition)

the way one looks at the world and the people of God. One needs to keep in mind that it may not be others that are changed when these principles are practiced but that God just may change them.

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